

# 18

## (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta

The (Karma) Discourse on the Noble Path | A 4.235 [A:B 4.237]

Theme: The 4 kinds of karma in terms of result

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

### 1 Sutta summary and significance

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND RELATED SUTTAS

**1.1.1 The (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta** (A 4.235) is a discourse on karma and its results. The Sutta speaks of 4 categories of karma in terms of quality and result, that is, *good karma*, *bad karma*, *mixed karma*, and “*neither good nor bad*” karma [1.2.1(4)]. The last kind of “karma”—or rather, the ending of all karma—leads to arhathood.

**1.1.2 The (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta** (A 4.235) is almost identical to **the (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta** (A 4.232).<sup>1</sup> They differ only in their last sections on the “neither-dark-nor-bright karma” with like result “that conduces to the destruction of karma” [§5].

While **A 4.235** has the noble eightfold path as its last section, **A 4.232** has “this intention to abandon” all the 3 kinds of karma mentioned. From this parallel structure, we can rightly deduce that the noble eightfold path is the equivalent, or rather, the practice in full, for the intention to abandon the 3 kinds of karma.<sup>2</sup>

**1.1.3** The key passage of **the Kukkura,vatika Sutta** (M 57) concerns the karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, that brings about the ending of karma,<sup>3</sup> that is, the abandoning of all kinds of karma, both bad and good, and which refers to the state of the saints, especially the arhat.<sup>4</sup> The Sutta defines “**the karma that ends karma**” as the volition (cetanā), that is, conscious mental effort, in abandoning both good and bad karma, both good and bad results.<sup>5</sup>

This statement on the Buddha’s teaching on *the karma that ends karma* is in diametrical contrast to the Jain view that we should “exhaust past bad karma through severe and painful austerities, and restrain [our] body, speech and mind right here and now,” as mentioned in **the Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 14).<sup>6</sup>

**1.1.4** The (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta is almost identical to **the (Kamma) Bojjhaṅga Sutta** (A 4.236), differing only in the last category of karma.<sup>7</sup> While **A 4.235** has the noble eightfold path [§5] in its last category of karma, **A 4.236** has the 7 awakening factors (bojjhaṅga)—those of mindfulness, discernment of mental states, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. The noble eightfold path and the 7 awakening-factors, as we know, are two of the 7 sets of teachings of early Buddhism, constituting the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi,pakkhiya,dhamma*).

<sup>1</sup> A 4.232/2:230-232 (SD 4.13).

<sup>2</sup> For details, see SD 4.13 (3).

<sup>3</sup> *Kammaṃ akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ akaṇhāsukkaṃ akaṇhāsukka,vipākaṃ kammaṃ kamma-k,khayāya sarivattanti* (M 57,11/1:389-391), SD 23.11.

<sup>4</sup> See SD 23.11 (2.1).

<sup>5</sup> For a study, see **Beyond Good and Evil**, SD 2.7 esp (9).

<sup>6</sup> M 14,17/1:93 (SD 4.7).

<sup>7</sup> A 4.236/2:236 f (SD 50.34).

These **7 sets** constituting the 37 limbs of awakening are as follows:

(1) The 4 focuses of mindfulness	<i>catu satipaṭṭhāna</i>	SD 13
(2) The 4 right strivings	<i>catu samma-p, padhāna</i>	SD 10.2
(3) The 4 bases of spiritual success	<i>catu iddhi, pāda</i>	SD 10.3
(4) The 5 spiritual faculties	<i>pañc'indriya</i>	SD 10.4
(5) The 5 spiritual powers	<i>pañca bala</i>	SD 10.5
(6) The 7 awakening-factors	<i>satta bojjhaṅga</i>	SD 10.15
(7) The noble eightfold path	<i>ariya aṭṭh'aṅika magga</i>	SD 10.16

Any of these 7 sets of dharmas either works by itself or in connection with other sets to bring about awakening. Our Suttas here have applied two of these 7 sets, that is, the 7 awakening-factors and the noble eightfold path. In this case, either set can work in itself, and it is merely a matter of personal inclination which path we choose.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Analysis of the 4 kinds of karma<sup>9</sup> [§2]

**1.2.1 The 4 kinds of karma** mentioned in the (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta [§1], and upon which it is structured, is explained in **the (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta** (A 4.232). The 4 categories of karma in terms of quality and result are as follows:

### (1) Dark [black] karma with dark result (*kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇha, vipākaṃ*)

“Dark” (*kaṇha*) karma are unwholesome (*akusala*) and bad (*apuñña = pāpa*). They are “**unwholesome**” by way of not being helpful to spiritual development, and “**bad**” in the sense of creating bad karma which relegates us to suffering states and situations un conducive to Dharma learning and practice. In other words, they generate unpleasant and unfortunate present and future states and experiences.

This category refers to bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions that are unwholesome, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. Such actions go against the 5 precepts, that are the basic code of moral conduct for a harmonious society, and which a practitioner constantly reminds himself to abide by.

### (2) Bright [white] karma, bright result (*kammaṃ sukkaṃ sukka, vipākaṃ*) [§3]

“Bright” (*sukka*) karma are wholesome (*kusala*) and good (*puñña*) [(2)], which generate pleasant and fortunate present and future states and experiences. This category refers to bodily, verbal and mental actions that are not afflictive (harmful to oneself or others), such as living in accordance with the 10 courses of wholesome karma, that is, *abstaining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from lying, from slander, from harsh (or abusive) speech, from frivolous talk, from covetousness, from ill will and from wrong view*.<sup>10</sup>

The Sutta says that “When he is touched by such contacts free from ill will, he enjoys feelings free from ill will that are extremely pleasurable—like the Subha, kiṇhā devas.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On the 7 sets, see SD 10.1.

<sup>9</sup> This whole section is very similar to the nn of **(Vitthāra) Kamma S** (A 4.232) @ SD 4.13 (2.1.4). The nn here are however slightly more detailed.

<sup>10</sup> On the 10 courses of wholesome karma (*dasa kusala kamma, patha*), see **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,11-14), SD 5.7; **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206,7.2-12) SD 3.9.

<sup>11</sup> The Subha, kiṇhā devas inhabit the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana form sphere. Although **Nānā Karaṇa S 1** (A 4.123/2:127 @ SD 23.8a) states that their lifespan is 4 aeons, Comy (AA 3:126) actually states that it is 64 aeons to conform with later

**(3) Dark-and-bright karma with dark-and-bright result** (*kammaṃ kaṇha,sukkaṃ kaṇha,sukka,-vipākam*) [§4]

These are bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are partly unwholesome, partly not. As examples of beings with such karma, the Sutta mentions “humans or some devas<sup>12</sup> or some hell-beings.”<sup>13</sup>

**(4) Neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result** (*kammaṃ akaṇham-āsukkaṃ akaṇha,asukka,vipākam*) [§5]

The **Sikha Moggallāna Sutta** says that this kind of karma “leads to the cessation of karma” (A 4.233).<sup>14</sup> It is “the karma that ends karma”—it leads to arhathood.

The **(Kamma) Ariya,magga Sutta** (A 4.235) explains this karmic process in terms of the cultivation of the noble eightfold path,<sup>15</sup> while the **(Kamma) Bojjhaṅga Sutta** (A 4.236) speaks on the same topic in terms of the cultivation of the 7 awakening factors (*satta bojjhaṅga*).<sup>16</sup>

**1.2.2** The Commentary says that it is the volition present in the 4 supramundane paths leading to the end of the cycle of life and death (AA 3:213). In short, this is **the intention** (*cetanā*)—that is, the mind of the saints of the path—to transcend the 3 kinds of karma mentioned above. The point, then, is clear: “a mind that is pure is naturally open to the possibility of self-understanding and spiritual freedom.” (Adam 2005: 6)<sup>17</sup>

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## The (Karma) Discourse on the Noble Path

A 4.235

**1** Bhikshus, there are these **4 kinds of karma** that have been declared by me, having realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What are the four?

### The 4 kinds of karma

- (1) There is, bhikshus, **dark [black] karma with dark result.** *kamma kaṇha kaṇha,vipāka*  
 (2) There is, bhikshus, **bright [white] karma with bright result.** *kamma sukka sukka,vipāka*

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Theravāda cosmology: see A:ÑB 293 n55. Those who habitually cultivate gladness (*muditā*) to the level of the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana are said to be reborn there: see **Nānā,karaṇa Mettā S 1** (A 4.128,3), SD 33.9.

<sup>12</sup> Comy: The devas of the sense-world who are happy in their own sphere, but unhappy when they observe the still greater happiness of the higher devas (AA 3:213).

<sup>13</sup> *Seyyathā’pi manussā ekacce ca devā ekacce ca vinīpātikā.* Comy: Pretas with divine mansions (*vemānika petā*), and also nagas (terrestrial serpent beings), harpies (*supaṇṇā*, half-human half-bird), elephants, horses, etc, who are sometimes happy, sometimes suffering (AA 3:213). The nagas and harpies are traditional enemies, often at war against one another (they are of course mythical beings). For an interesting example, see the case of the Sāvaththī seth in **Aputtaka S 2** (S 3.20/1:91-93), SD 23.12. See also **Karma**, SD 18.1 (5.3.2).

<sup>14</sup> A 4.233/2:233 (SD 18.7(9.3)).

<sup>15</sup> A 4.235/2:235 f (SD 50.18).

<sup>16</sup> A 4.236/2:236 f (SD 50.34).

<sup>17</sup> For the types of karma in Skt texts, see SD 23.11 (2.3).

- (3) There is, bhikshus, **dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright result.**
- (4) There is, bhikshus, **neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result,**  
karma which leads to the destruction of karma.

*kamma kaṇha, sukka kaṇha, sukka, vipāka*

*akaṇha, asukka akaṇha, asukka, vipāka*

### (1) Dark karma with dark result

2 And what, bhikshus, is **dark karma with dark result?**<sup>18</sup>

2.2 Here, bhikshus, one<sup>19</sup>

creates<sup>20</sup> afflictive<sup>21</sup> bodily formation [karma];

creates afflictive verbal formation;

creates afflictive mental formation.

*kaya, saṅkhāraṃ abhisāṅkharoti*

*vacī, saṅkhāraṃ abhisāṅkharoti*

*mano, saṅkhāraṃ abhisāṅkharoti*

2.3 Having created *afflictive* bodily formation,  
having created *afflictive* verbal formation,  
having created *afflictive* mental formation,

one arises in an afflictive world.

2.4 When one has arisen into an afflictive world, afflictive contacts<sup>22</sup> touch one.<sup>23</sup>

2.5 When one is touched by such afflictive contacts,

one suffers afflictive feelings<sup>24</sup> that are entirely painful—as in the case of hell-beings.<sup>25</sup>

2.6 This, bhikshus, is called *dark karma with dark result*.

### (2) Bright karma with bright result

3 And what, bhikshus, is **bright karma with bright result?**

3.2 Here, bhikshus, one

creates unafflictive<sup>26</sup> bodily formation,<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇha, vipakaṃ.*

<sup>19</sup> “One,” *ekacco*, a certain (being).

<sup>20</sup> “Creates,” or “generates,” *abhisāṅkharoti*, ie, “to confer potential energy to something” (CPD), “to arrange, prepare.”

<sup>21</sup> “Afflictive,” *sa, vyāpajjhaṃ*. Comy glosses as “with suffering” (*sa, dukkhaṃ*, AA 3:212).

<sup>22</sup> “Contacts,” *phassā*, ie, dependent on the sense-organ and sense-object, sense-consciousness arises: the meeting of the three is contact (**Madhu, piṇḍika S**, M 18,16), SD 6.14. In short, these contacts are sense-experiences.

<sup>23</sup> “Contacts ... touch him,” *phassā phusanti*, ie he is confronted by various acts of ill will.

<sup>24</sup> “He suffers feelings connected with ill will,” *sa, vyāpajjhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyati*. Comy: He suffers feelings connected with affliction (*s’ābādhaṃ*) (AA 3:212). The word *ābādha* has a range of meanings: pain, affliction, trouble, illness, sickness, disease, distress (CPD).

<sup>25</sup> “That is to say, hell-beings,” *seyyathā’pi sattā nerayikā*. Bodhi: “In this passage (and the counterparts below) we can discover several of the main links in the formula of dependent origination: volitional formations bring about rebirth into an appropriate world (which is ultimately a constellation of consciousness and name-and-form), and once rebirth is established, contact gives rise to feeling. The sutta establishes that the world in which we arise, and the affective quality of our experience within that world, reflect the nature of our actions in previous existences.” (A:B 296 n86). In other words, one need not actually fall into “hell” (as a place beyond here and now) to suffer hellish pains.

<sup>26</sup> “Unafflictive” (*avyāpajjha*) is throughout used as the opposite of “afflictive” (*vyāpajjha*). “Unafflictive” refers to the opp of “afflictive,” whereas “non-afflictive” means “that which is *not* afflictive, as well as the neither afflictive nor not afflictive, ie, neutral karma.”

creates unafflictive verbal formation,  
creates unafflictive mental formation.

- 3.3 Having created *unafflictive* bodily formation,  
Having created *unafflictive* verbal formation,  
having created *unafflictive* mental formation,

one arises in an *unafflictive* world.

- 3.4 When one has arisen in an unafflictive world, *unafflictive* contacts touch one.

3.5 When one is touched by such unafflictive contacts,  
one feels *unafflictive* feelings that are entirely pleasurable—as in the case of the Subha,kinhā devas.<sup>28</sup>

- 3.6 This, bhikshus, is called *bright karma with bright result*.

### (3) Dark-and-bright karma with dark-and-bright result

- 4 And what, bhikshus, is **dark-and-bright karma with dark-and-bright result**?<sup>29</sup>

- 4.2 Here, bhikshus, one creates  
bodily formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive,  
verbal formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive,  
mental formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive.

- 4.3 Having created bodily formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*,  
having created verbal formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*,  
having created mental formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*

one arises in a world that is both *afflictive* and *unafflictive*.

4.4 When one has arisen in a world that is afflictive and unafflictive, both *afflictive* and *unafflictive* contacts touch one.

4.5 When one is touched by afflictive and unafflictive contacts,  
one feels *afflictive* and *unafflictive* feelings, those that are painful and those that are pleasant, those filled and mixed with pain and pleasure<sup>30</sup>—as in the case of humans, and some devas,<sup>31</sup> and some lower-world beings.<sup>32</sup>

- 4.6 This, bhikshus, is called *dark-and-bright karma with dark-and-bright result*.

### (4) Neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright result

5 And what, bhikshus, is **neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result that conduces to the destruction of karma**?<sup>33</sup>

- 5.2 Right view, right intention,

<sup>27</sup> “Bodily formation,” *kāya,saṅkhāra* = *kāya,kamma* (bodily karma).

<sup>28</sup> The Subha,kinhā devas (“radiant glory”) inhabit the highest of 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana heavens. See (1.2.1 (2)) n above.

<sup>29</sup> *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇha,vipakaṃ*. Here, the Pali is *vipakaṃ*, which is singular; hence, we need to take “result” as an uncountable n. Such karmic results can be *either* painful or pleasant *or* perceived as painful or pleasant, depending on the mental state of the person.

<sup>30</sup> *So sa,vyāpajjhehi pi avyāpajjhehi pi phassehi phuttho samāno sa,vyāpajjhaṃ pi avyāpajjham pi vedanaṃ vediyati vokiṇṇaṃ saṅkiṇṇaṃ sukha,dukkhaṃ*.

<sup>31</sup> Comy: The devas of the sense-world who are happy in their own sphere, but unhappy when they observe the still greater happiness of the higher devas (AA 3:213).

<sup>32</sup> *Seyyathā’pi manussā ekacce ca devā ekacce ca vinīpātikā*. See (1.2.1 (3)) n above.

<sup>33</sup> *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ akaṇham-asukkaṃ akaṇha,asukka,kamma-k,khayāya saṃvattati*. On the difference between this Sutta (A 4.235) and A 4.232, see (1.1.2).

right speech, right action, right livelihood,  
right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

5.3 This, bhikshus, is called *neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result that conduces to the destruction of karma*.

6 These, bhikshus, are the 4 kinds of karma that have been declared by me, having realized them for myself with direct knowledge.

— evaṃ —

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